



FILM REVIEW

## ***The Swimmers: Reflecting on Displacement, Migration, and the Politics of Exclusion***

Natasha Sofia Martinez \*

### ***The Swimmers***

Film (drama), 2022

Directed by Sally El Hosaini

Written by Sally El Hosaini and Jack Thorne

Runtime: 2 hours and 14 minutes

Original Languages: English, Arabic

More information at:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8745676/>

“They have no idea [that] people are dying in that sea”  
— *The Swimmers*

*The Swimmers*, directed by Sally El Hosaini, is a biographical film premised on the real-life forced migration of two Syrian sisters, Yusra and Sara Mardini, who decided to leave Syria in 2015, following the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.

The film spans various temporalities, depicting the transition of the Mardini sisters living a somewhat normal life during the Syrian war, to navigating precarious crossings from Syria to Turkey, Turkey to Greece, Greece to Germany, culminating with their transition from “asylum seekers” to “refugees”.

The film bears witness to the physical and emotional toll of forced migration, the fatigue and exhaustion, family separation, abuse and trauma, and the constant feeling of uncertainty. The Mardini sisters’ experience of



displacement and forced migration is not unique. In fact, their story transcends borders. From South America to North America, from Africa to Europe, from Asia to Oceania, “irregular migrants” of various ages transit through countries and across hostile terrains to reach

\* **Natasha Sofia Martinez**, Research Associate at the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC), and PhD Student in the Department of Politics at York University, Canada. Email: [martinns@yorku.ca](mailto:martinns@yorku.ca) Twitter: [@natysofia](https://twitter.com/natysofia)

safety. But survival comes at a cost. Having to rely on smugglers, irregular migrants like Yusra and Sara will spend hundreds to thousands of dollars to transit borders, while simultaneously being exploited and exposed to near-death experiences.

The Mardini sisters' journey across the Aegean Sea in an overcrowded, patched-up inflatable boat also reveals the disastrous consequences associated with migration management policies like Prevention through Deterrence (PTD). Anthropology Professor Jason De Leon has written (2015) that PTD strategies are used by the State to force irregular migrants to journey through remote regions that have less security, but more hostile terrain. The Sea, in this context, is an area of hostile terrain that is not as heavily monitored as land borders in the region; thus asylum seekers make the active decision to embark on a risky journey in makeshift boats, often overpacked, and, as the film reveals, many cannot swim.

Despite De Leon writing about PTD in the context of the US–Mexico border, the experiences of Yusra and Sara, and the hundreds of others that cross the Aegean Sea, reveal the transnational application of PTD strategies and their consequences. For instance, in the film there is a scene where a distress call is made to the coastguard. Despite being in “Greek Waters”, the coastguard informs them that it is not their policy to intervene. To save the lives of everyone on board, the Mardini sisters jump into the sea and swim alongside the boat until they reach the Greek Island of Lesbos. While they survived, this is not the reality for many as there have also been about “25,000 deaths since 2014” (Sunderland 2022). The issue here is not that asylum seekers are using their agency to migrate, but rather, the politics of exclusion the state is relying on to deter asylum seekers, pushing them towards peripheral spaces.

The UNHCR determines that “more than a million refugees and migrants [have] crossed the Mediterranean to Europe” (UNHCR 2022). The film evokes these numbers when panning over the layers of lifejackets in Lesbos, representative of the thousands of bodies that have made this trek over the last decade. This scene speaks volumes, and the film does an excellent job of implicitly allowing viewers to draw parallels to similar scenes located in areas thousands of miles away like the Mexico–US border or the Darien Gap, where shoes, backpacks, water bottles, and other objects cover the ground, left behind by irregular migrants.

Upon arriving to Lesbos, their precarious journey does not end. The sisters experience xenophobia, smuggler scams, and are almost detained by police when marching from Greece to Germany. The film effectively reveals the anti-immigrant sentiments that asylum seekers face when transiting through Europe. Despite their harrowing

journey across borders, Yusra and Sara reach Berlin and formally claim asylum, starting the process of their transition from asylum seeker to refugee.

However, the film also reveals that becoming a refugee is not always a smooth process, nor is it greener on the other side. Since arriving in Greece, the Mardini sisters and their group instinctively avoid registering with any “camp”, as they know they would become stuck there. While this was not the case in Berlin, as they readily registered to try to obtain family reunification, the film’s portrayal of the camp as a liminal stage and space is nevertheless evident. For instance, the film reveals how asylum claimants are housed—in cramped spaces with administrative oversight and limited privacy. The “camp” experience is not unique. In fact, it is one that many asylum seekers can relate to. Whether in Kenya or in Jordan, the camp is another space where refugees experience uncertainty and precariousness.

*The Swimmers* amplifies the call for the safe passage of asylum seekers by exposing viewers to the harsh realities associated with the politics of exclusion of certain bodies. By showcasing Yusra’s and Sara’s journey, El Hosaini effectively brings attention to the structural obstacles that asylum seekers face around the globe, while still providing space for agency, solidarity, and collectiveness to shine through, whether this is through Yusra’s decision to migrate, the sisterly bond throughout, or the transnational collective mobility practices the Mardini sister’s participate in, migrating as a group from Turkey to Greece and from Greece to Germany.

Still, what makes Yusra’s and Sara’s experience so captivating is how they consistently disrupt the concept of refugeeness in the film. Whether it is Yusra’s ambition to train as an Olympian, despite the cards she has been dealt, or Sara’s desire to work as a humanitarian in Lesbos, the sisters highlight how refugees are not just refugees. They have a past, a present, and a future.

## Works Cited

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